

Carbon monoxide alarms are the law in California

By Teri Mizuhara

Carbon Monoxide, aka CO, is widely known as the “silent killer” because you can not see it, taste it, or smell it.

Annually, more than 400 people die and another 20,000 are hospitalized due to CO poisoning.

So what exactly is carbon monoxide? CO is the result of combustion (burning) of a fuel such as wood burning fireplaces, gas furnace, gas water heaters, gas stoves and ovens, portable generators, barbecue grills and even your running car or truck.

The fumes from the combustion contain CO gas and when a person breaths this gas in they are subject to CO poisoning.

CalFire Amador-El Dorado Unit Chief Kelly Keenan said, “If you are exposed to high levels of CO, you may feel flu-like symptoms such as a headache, nausea, shortness of breath, dizziness/light headedness because the CO replaces the oxygen in the red blood cell and won’t allow oxygen to reach your organs. A person’s red blood cells actually bond with CO easier than it bonds with oxygen. High levels of CO can kill a person in minutes and it is the No. 1 cause of unintentional death by poison in the U.S.”

If you suspect CO poisoning, get the person or persons to fresh air immediately, then call 911. In some cases CO poisoning can cause permanent brain and heart damage.

As of July 1, carbon monoxide alarms in single family dwellings are required by state law. Minimally, you should have CO alarms outside each sleeping area and on each level of

your home including the basement.

If you can afford it, put a CO alarm in each sleeping bedroom. Check the batteries monthly and change the battery twice a year. If they are plug-ins, test them once a month and if they have a battery backup, change that battery twice a year.

Don't forget to vacuum the alarms often to keep them in proper working order.

Key points:

Never use a barbecue or outdoor space heater in your home or garage.

Do not leave your vehicle running in your garage, even for a few minutes.

Never heat your room or home with your kitchen oven.

Have your home heating system checked by a professional annually.

Have your wood burning stove or fire place professionally cleaned annually.

"If your CO alarm sounds: Get everyone out of the house and call 911. If you can't physically leave the house, move to an open doorway or open a window and stay there. Call 911. Do not close the window or door," Keenan said. "Never reenter the structure until the fire department has said it is OK, that is our job and we are more than happy to do it."

Teri Mizuhara works for CalFire in the Camino office.